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ABSTRACT

For good or ill, textbooks are the most widespread means of disseminating theoretically-informed practices in the field of composition and rhetoric. In fact, in spite of the growing number of graduate programs concentrating on composition theory, pedagogy, and rhetoric, composition textbooks still reach more teachers and more students than scholarly discussions. There are a number of actions that reviewers of the composition textbooks--practicing composition scholars--can practice that would do much to insure that textbooks contain responsible material. First, the reviewer should agree to review the book only if he or she is associated with the course in question. Second, the reviewer should examine and critique whether or not the text fulfills the pedagogical claims it makes in the prefatory material. Third, the reviewer should support scholars and teachers within the composition community by "blowing the whistle" on those who capitalize on fads and trends and support books written by academics rather than by freelance writers. Fourth, reviewers should call for better instructor resources and better technological support at every opportunity. (Contains 13 references.) (TB)

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ED 397 404

PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION OF COMPOSITION TEXTBOOKS: WHAT CAN WE DO?

Before I begin, I have a story I'd like to tell you. A few years ago, Purdue hosted a weekend gathering of people interested in Rhetoric & Composition from several Midwestern schools. The point of the weekend was to share -- informally -- in conversations about our current research topics or issues arising from our teaching. I was new at this kind of thing, but I tried to get into the spirit. When it was my turn, I blurted out that I wanted to do "a Foucauldian institutional analysis of the composition textbook industry" -- and I explained that the topic grew out of my own experience working for 6 years for two composition publishers right after I left undergraduate school. Now at this point, one of the faculty members sitting across from me interrupted and said "Ohhh, Booooo!". Just like that. Same intonation and everything. It was *very* strange.

At the time, I was a first year Ph.D. student. And I really wasn't sure how to react to this . . . noise -- so I said a little bit more, retreated, and passed right on to the next person. Now, two years later, as I actually begin to write that dissertation, that sound -- that "Boooo!" -- still haunts me. It is more than *just* strange. The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that that "Booo" is an *untenable* and *irresponsible* position for *anyone* in composition studies to hold.

For good or ill, textbooks *are* the most widespread means of disseminating our theoretically-informed practices. In fact, in *spite* of the growing number of graduate programs concentrating on composition theory, pedagogy, and rhetoric, composition textbooks still reach *more* teachers and *more* students than our scholarly discussions. And

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that is why I am here today. We *cannot* afford to dismiss and degrade matters pertaining to the textbook publishing industry quite so simply as just saying "Boo."

Whether we like it or not, we *are* involved in the production and consumption of composition textbooks -- even those of us who choose *not* to use them at all. Since we are implicated anyway, we should act responsibly, intelligently, and ethically.

Today, in this Caucus, then, I hope to provide some handles for discussing the roles that *each of us* in this room plays in the production and consumption of composition textbooks.

Who are *We*?

The first thing I need to do, then, is to define what I mean when I say "WE". Most conversations about the intersection of textbook publishers and practitioners assume a false binary: the *publisher* and the *teacher*. My first task, then, is to complicate that binary. Textbook production and consumption is itself a very heavily mediated process, calling on the collaborative input of vast numbers of people in both professions -- publishing *and* teaching. And I maintain that *both* communities bear the responsibility if the eventual products aren't satisfactory. Let's look at the first page in my handout.

[go to handout 1]

As you can see, the binary doesn't even hold up under the most cursory analysis. There are a number of subject positions within the "Publishers" box, and a number in the "Practitioner" box. Most interesting for today's purposes are the borderlands -- in the spirit of the conference theme perhaps I should call these the positions on the Boundary.

These are the interfaces between the two industries, and these are the sites at which we have the most potential for creating change: as authors, as work-for-hire collaborators, as ancillary authors, as proposal reviewers, as developmental reviewers, as contracted list consultants, as focus-group participants, and as on-line support staff.

I suspect that every one in this room occupies a couple of these positions -- indeed I have occupied most -- almost all -- of them in the past 10 years. So if this WE is such an encompassing community, in which we all alternately play different roles. So what can we DO in those roles? That's the next part of the title under consideration.

What We Can Do

Given that much of the composition scholarship addressing matters related to textbooks say either implicitly or explicitly that *something is wrong* with them, I feel strongly that each of us, in our differing and complimentary positions, understand our *responsibility* within production and consumption cycles. Rather than bemoaning the "intellectual poverty" (Crowley) or the "coherent contradictions" (Faigley) of writing textbooks, I want us to consider rhetorical action -- what CAN we DO? In other words: What actions are in the realm of possibility?

I believe that there are a number of actions any of us can take, all within the realm of the possible. I have begun to articulate some of these in the rest of the handout in front of you. Time doesn't permit me to go through each of the four roles I've explored in the hand-out, so I'll focus just on some suggestions for our responses when we act as developmental reviewers.

"Agree to review only if associated with the course in question", **"Agree to review only if you have taught the course in question in the past few years"** and **"Suggest good teachers who have knowledge of theory and a commitment to composition studies in lieu of yourself."** These may well be unpopular suggestions. I have been serving on a textbook review committee this year, and I have been astonished at the number of brochure blurbs and reviewer comments offered by people that I *know* have not taught the applicable course in years. If we as a field value the continual inter-relations between theory and practice, then we should make greater efforts to ensure that our textbook developers (via commissioned reviews) themselves enact the theory-practice connection. A joint review -- an administrator working with a graduate instructor -- would provide an opportunity for professional development mentoring while continuing a dialog between theory-informing-practice and practice-informing-theory. Publishers might even be willing to increase their honoraria for such a joint review.

"Examine and critique whether or not text fulfills the pedagogical claims it makes in prefatory material", **"Examine and critique whether or not text fulfills the theoretical and philosophical goals it claims in the prefatory material"** and **"Examine and critique the social order and student subjectivity espoused and replicated in text."** These questions ask for a level of analysis beyond what most editors will ask for when they commission the review. But I maintain that the effort is well worth it. Most of the critiques of textbooks in our scholarship (and there are lots of them) bemoan issues arising from these three questions. Books promise innovations they don't deliver; books undermine their own theoretical approaches by replicating the same old current-traditional

stuff; books construct students merely as docile bodies incapable of critical thought, fostering a learned helplessness. Questioning in reviews whether or not texts are living up to their "sales points" can only help those books with positive social potential.

"Support scholars and teachers in the composition community; blow the whistle on those who 'capitalize' on fads and trends" , **"Support books written by academics, rather than by freelance writers"** and **"Suggest more suitable authors for particular approaches."** These actions are mostly for our own community-building. Success often breeds imitators, and given the high stakes in composition publishing it is no surprise that writers and publishers alike would try to literally capitalize on a trend that seems like a good and profitable idea. The problem, of course, is the lack of a theory-practice connection. Likewise, there has been a move to sign authors who are not teachers, have perhaps never been teachers, to put together cheaper textbooks. Where's the theory-practice connection in that process? Several years ago, one company went so far as to publish readers completely in-house, thus eliminating those pesky academic middlemen (us). We cannot support these endeavors. The final suggestion of the three allows us a chance to educate the editor with whom we might be working about the distinctions we make within our own field. Who is really good at a particular approach? Who might be able to bring together theory and practice responsibly, intelligently, and ethically?

"Call for better instructor resources and better technological support at every opportunity." We must remember our instructors. They often don't have the access, the voice, to make their needs known. Yet they are the ones carrying the books

into the classroom, requiring their students to purchase those books, and perhaps building their pedagogies around the materials they are required to use. Adoption committees are often catered to; teachers, however, are not.

In conclusion, I hope that in these 10 minutes I have been able to accomplish a number of agenda items. I hope I have provided some handles for discussing how we *can* act -- indeed, how we *should* act -- as a community of professionals in intersecting industries. I hope I have broken through the overly simplistic "us versus them" picture that is too prevalent in our scholarship. "Us" and "Them" are *both* very much implicated in this intersection -- our areas of overlap and our influences on one another are too great to ignore. So finally, I hope this presentation has offered some sites for action, for resistance, and for change.

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Who are *We?*

Composition Publishers
Acquisitions Editors
Development Editors
Production Editors
Copy Editors
Designers
Editorial Directors
Legal Departments
Marketers
Sales Staff
Sales Management
Advertising Departments

Interfaces
Authors
Work-for-Hire Collaborators
Ancillary Authors
Commissioned Reviewers
Contracted Consultants
Focus-group Participants
On-line Support Staff

Composition Practitioners
Decision-makers and Committees
Textbook Users:
- Faculty
-Graduate Students
-Part-time Instructors
-Adjunct Instructors
Textbook Purchasers (Students)

What We Can Do

As "Decision-Makers"

- Reject textbooks altogether; opt for course-paks, micro-publishing, custom-publishing
- Create own, student-driven texts for use in individual classes
- Involve students in the decision-making process
- Support certain colleagues and scholars in the composition community
- Support certain publishers because of their contributions to the field
- Support certain publishers because of their ideology and ownership
- Select text based on its pedagogy
- Select text based on its theory and philosophy
- Select text based on the social order it promotes

As "Developmental Reviewers"

- Agree to review only if associated with the course in question
- Agree to review only if you have taught the course in question in the past few years
- Suggest good teachers (who have a knowledge of theory and a commitment to composition studies) in lieu of yourself
- Examine and critique whether or not text fulfills the pedagogical claims it makes in prefatory material
- Examine and critique whether or not text fulfills the theoretical and philosophical goals it claims in prefatory material
- Examine and critique the social order and student subjectivity espoused and replicated by text
- Support scholars and teachers in the composition community; blow the whistle on those who "capitalize" on fads and trends
- Support books written by academics, rather than freelance writers
- Suggest more suitable authors for particular approaches
- Call for better instructor resources and better technological support at every opportunity

As "Contracted Consultants"

- Support and suggest members of the composition community
- Offer names of those who teach courses on a regular basis, not just those with "big names" or those who direct important programs
- Suggest innovations for breaking through the traditional three genres (rhetoric, reader, handbook)
- Push for technological support and collaboration with printed texts
- Focus on real pedagogical change, not just new sales points on old features
- Send in relevant reviews of the company's textbooks as you see them appear in journals; send in relevant pedagogical articles that might translate to a textbook

As "Instructors"

- Provide places for students to critique instructional materials, and forward those responses to those in a position to act on the critique
- Give honest feedback to publisher's representatives when they call
- Talk with publishers at conventions, offering specific advice for pedagogical innovation
- Express an interest in being a developmental reviewer, and provide qualifications
- Request more ***student*** involvement in publications and processes
- Request more ***teacher*** involvement in publications and processes
- Send in candid responses on "comment cards" rather than blurbs destined for brochures
- Request better instructor resources, offering specific needs
- Request pedagogically-sound multi-media and technological links whenever possible
- Request more theoretically-informed books whenever possible; suggest good teacher-authors for such projects
- Write reviews and critiques to be published in teaching journals; send them to publisher or author when completed